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Christopher J. Dawe

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JOYFUL MARTYR?
A BRIEF LOOK AT MONTANISTIC INTERPOLATIONS
IN IGNATIUS' EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS
CHRISTOPHER J. DAWE

The Apostolic Father, Ignatius of Antioch,¹ was executed by the Roman Empire circa 100 C.E. En route to Rome, where his sentence was enacted, Ignatius wrote seven letters to various Christian churches in the Roman world. While six of these letters deal with relatively mundane matters, the *Epistle to the Romans* details the eagerness with which Ignatius faced death. Ignatius was certainly not the first Christian martyr, but he was the first to approach death with what amounts to glee. He also appears to be the first to counsel others to follow suit and seek martyrdom. This is surprisingly odd for a first century Christian. In that era there is no canonical or extracanonical indication, aside from Ignatius, that martyrdom was sought, much less encouraged. Ignatius' letter stands conspicuously alone—not only is it completely at odds with other authors, it is also out of place with his other writings. How then, is Ignatius' unique letter explained?

While martyrdom as an ideal is not in keeping with first-century Christianity it is quite at home in the second century. That century had been inundated with Montanism, a Christian group whose teachings gave rise to a movement that welcomed death and ecstatically embraced it.² Many a critical

1. Ignatius, or Theophorus ("Bearer of God") as he styled himself, was bishop of Antioch, a post previously held by Peter and Evodius. His claims to have been a disciple of John and to have been appointed to his bishopric by Peter have largely been accepted by the divergent Christian strains, notably the Catholic and Greek Orthodox faiths. During the reign of the Emperor Trajan, Ignatius was condemned to death and sent to Rome. Though there are accounts of Ignatius' actual death none appear authentic (Andrew Louth, introduction to Ignatius' *Epistle to the Romans*, (trans. Maxwell Staniforth; New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 55.).

2. While there is some debate as to whether Montanus, founder of Montanism, encouraged martyrdom (with Christine Trevett correctly pointing out that no existing primary sources show a connection), there is no argument that succeeding generations of Montanists considered martyrdom an ideal. Indeed, W. H. C. Frend claims that martyrdom, prophesy, and asceticism were "the hallmarks of Montanism" (W. H. C. Frend, *The Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 254.).

eye has been cast at the epistles of Ignatius concerning their credibility.³ These have felt that it is likely that the *Epistle to the Romans* was contaminated in later centuries by the fervor for martyrdom connected with Montanism.

The Epistle to the Romans

As already noted, Ignatius composed six other letters, all of which encourage submission to ecclesiastical leadership and attack the newly developed beliefs that were plaguing the orthodox Church.⁴ Like other public correspondences, these epistles were designed to promote Christian virtue. The *Epistle to the Romans*, however, stands distinctly apart from his others as it centers not on ecclesiastical matters but Ignatius' personal life. Indeed, his letter makes no reference to his bishopric, and "his usual warnings against error are absent from the epistle, for error itself, he wrote, had been 'filtered' from the Roman church."⁵ Indeed, the *Epistle to the Romans* is strikingly unique in that Ignatius deals only with his impending death. He longs "for his fate with a lover's passion"⁶ and requests that none, Christian or heathen, interfere with his execution. "I am," proclaims Ignatius, "truly in earnest about dying for God."⁷

I must implore you to do me no such untimely kindness; pray leave me to be a meal for the beasts, for it is they who can provide my way to God. I am his wheat, ground fine by the lion's teeth to be made the purest bread for Christ. Better still, incite the creatures to become a sepulcher for me; let them not leave the smallest scrap of my flesh, so that I need not be a burden to anyone after I fall asleep. When there is no trace of my body left for the world to see, then I shall truly be Jesus Christ's disciple. . . . How I look forward to the real lions . . . if they are still reluctant [to kill me], I shall force them. (Ignatius, 86)

Ignatius' letters were widely circulated through the ancient world and, given his status, proved to be quite influential to the early Church. Therefore, it is not surprising someone would try to use that influence to their own ends.

Early Martyrs

A brief look at other martyrdom accounts previous to or contemporaneous with that of Ignatius would be beneficial in determining if the letter to the Romans was tainted. These are generally considered authentic and are indicative of the general mood at the time. The martyrdom of Stephen, as recorded in Acts 7, is the first known incident of martyrdom. The narrative places Stephen in the hands the Sanhedrin and shows his attack on the religion

3. See Louth's notes in *Early Christian Writings* (55), Rius-Camps' *The Four Authentic Letters of Ignatius, the Martyr* (14), and Richardson's *The Christianity of Ignatius of Antioch* (4).

4. All seven were compiled by Polycarp and published posthumously (Ignatius, 55).

5. Christine Trevett, *A Study of Ignatius of Antioch in Syria and Asia* (Lewiston, N.Y.: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992): 91.

6. Louth, *Introduction*, 84.

7. Ign., *Rom.*, 1.4.

of the time. It concludes with his vision of God the Father and God the Son and Stephen's request that he be received into the arms of Christ. At no point does Stephen eagerly demand death or incite others to follow him.

Acts 12 tells of the death of James the Greater and the near-martyrdom of Peter. Peter had been imprisoned by Herod Agrippa after the king executed James which was popular with the populace. Peter and James were both captured by Herod Agrippa. They did not voluntarily go to death. Indeed, when Peter was presented with the opportunity, he happily escaped death. Likewise, Paul in his initial imprisonment brandished his citizenship in an effort to avoid torture and condemnation (Acts 22). Another Apostle, James the brother of Jesus, was, according to Josephus, stoned by the Sanhedrin.⁸ Eusebius differs slightly, and states that James was initially thrown from the roof of the temple and then stoned. Neither account shows a desire for martyrdom.

Polycarp,⁹ who was acquainted with and praised the "perfect fortitude . . . [of] the blessed Ignatius," provides a more detailed account of his own encounter with martyrdom.¹⁰ Like Ignatius, he suffered the martyr's death. Unlike his predecessor, however, there remains a direct account. *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* records that, far from eagerly demanding that the Romans speed up his death, he fled the authorities and "made his way quietly to a small country property."¹¹ Polycarp did not deny the faith and approached death without trepidation. Even so, he did not eagerly await martyrdom.

Further, Polycarp was apparently told of a man named Quintus who surrendered himself and others to the authorities only to have his "courage fail at the sight of the beasts" and "was induced by the Governor to take oath and offer incense."¹² This story is followed by an editorial comment stating, "We do not approve of men offering themselves spontaneously. We are not taught anything of that kind in the Gospel."¹³ These accounts all demonstrate the same concept. While martyrdom may occasionally be a necessary sealing of service to Christ, it is not something to be pursued. At Ignatius' time there was no widespread desire for martyrdom. It is only with the advent of Montanism that martyrdom begins to be seen as an ideal.

8. Joseph., *Ant.*, 20.

9. Though the martyrdom of Polycarp occurred years after that of Ignatius, it should still be considered in a study of this question. Polycarp also came from the generation that had come into direct contact with Christ's Apostles. He evidentially had a high esteem for the spiritual nature of Ignatius and is the man credited with first collecting his letters. His is, all in all, perhaps the best indication of the notion of martyrdom at the time of Ignatius' death.

10. Pol., *Phil.*, 1.9.

11. *Mart. Pol.* 1.5.

12. An obvious recantation of the faith.

13. *Mart. Pol.* 1.4.

Montanism

Half a century after the death of Ignatius, a new strain of Christianity began to flourish in the area of Phrygia: Montanism.¹⁴ Founded in the middle of the second century by Montanus, a self-styled prophet claiming to be the *paraclete* that Jesus promised a century and a half earlier. Montanism proclaimed the imminent arrival of Christ. A systematic review of Montanus' theology is unnecessary—it is sufficient to say that his belief system spread rapidly in the second and third centuries throughout the Roman world and that the clergy of the dominant faith were not pleased.¹⁵

Montanus' message contains the first systematic call for martyrdom as a means to salvation. Though his sect would dwindle and face persecution from its orthodox counterpart, it influenced the Church. Friend claims that, through the writings of Tertullian¹⁶ martyrdom would be seen as increasingly acceptable:

Thanks to [his] genius . . . it was the sectarian of charm of Montanism that was to inspire the outlook of the new Latin Church. The Gospel message had sufficed for Christianity's youth. The New Prophecy spoke for [a new] age. . . . The consequences of this conviction for the future . . . of the Church were to be incalculable.¹⁷

According to Tertullian, “Who on inquiry does not join us, and joining us does not wish to suffer, that he may purchase for himself the whole grace of God, that he may win full pardon from God by paying his own blood for it.”¹⁸

Martyrdom, to the Montanists, was not only good for the soul, it was “the life blood of the Church.” In his work on Tertullian, T. D. Barnes states that for Tertullian, a man had “to face martyrdom cheerfully” as opposed to “a recent catholic ‘martyr’ who died only because he was too drunk to deny being a Christian.”¹⁹

A Reexamination of the *Epistle to the Romans*

The epistles of Ignatius have long been a subject of debate, “provoking an endless series of reactions in favor of, or against, their authenticity.”²⁰ While

14. Arriving at a specific date for the beginnings of Montanism is difficult. Eusebius places it during the twelfth year of Aurelius' rule, 172. Epiphanius claims 156. Trevett takes the middle road, saying the 160's (Trevett, *Montanism*, 41.) An exact date is unnecessary for this paper as long as it is accepted that the development of Montanism took place some decades after the death of Ignatius in 107.

15. Friend, *Church*, 70.

16. Tertullian, at first an outspoken foe of heresies, was a passionate proponent of Montanism.

17. Friend, *Church*, 71.

18. Tert. *Apol.* 15:16.

19. Timothy David Barnes, *Tertullian: a Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971): 135–136.

20. I Rius-Camps, *The Four Authentic Letters of Ignatius, the Martyr* (Rome: Pontificum Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1980): 15.

the text that we use today²¹ is generally accepted as authentic, “Challenges to Ignatian authorship have not ceased.”²² Indeed, allegations of interpolations aside, arguments have claimed that the entire text of *Romans* is a forgery.²³ It is easy to see why. *The Epistle to the Romans* “is in striking contrast”²⁴ when placed in apposition to the other six letters credited to Ignatius. Ignatius’ other writings all have the express purpose of encouraging strict obedience to ecclesiastical leadership and denouncing heresies. In *Romans*, however, far from instructing the parishioners (instructions never being far in his other epistles), Ignatius congratulates them on being “purified from every alien and discolouring stain” (Ignatius, 85).²⁵

Further, Ignatius is concerned here only with his glorious death and making sure the congregation knows to “keep [their] lips sealed,” claiming that martyrdom is his best “chance . . . of getting to God” (Ignatius, 85). Not only should the Christians not “lend him assistance” they should “take part instead, for it is the part of God.” His encouragement of martyrdom seems opposite of his more benign instruction to “abjure all factions, for they are the beginning of evil . . . Make sure that no step affecting the Church is ever taken by anyone without the bishop’s sanction” (Ignatius, 85).

Montanistic Influence

It is possible that at some point Montanistic interpolations were added to the *Epistle to the Romans* if, in fact, the text is not a complete forgery. The connection between Ignatius and Montanism is not new. W. M. Calder, in his study of Montanism, and commenting on another of Ignatius’ letters, suggests “that the letter of Ignatius to the Philadelphians be examined in the light of the connection of Philadelphia with the origin of Montanism.”²⁶ Trevett laments that his suggestion “has never been taken seriously.” She further comments,

21. “The text of Ignatius has come down to us in three very different recensions: Long, Middle, and Short. The *Long* recension consists of thirteen letters, of which seven are also found in the Middle recension, but with a notably more concise text. The *Middle* recension contains only seven letters. Finally the *Short* recension has only three, with a much shorter text than the Middle one . . . after a period of more than four centuries of extended polemics we have come to recognize as textus receptus that which is known as the Middle or Eusebian recension, consisting of seven letters with a middle text between the Longer (interpolated and forged) and the Shorter (epitomized) form” (Rius-Camps, 13–14).

22. Trevett, *Study*, 11.

23. Trevett, *Study*, 11.

24. Louth, *Introduction*, 84.

25. This statement itself should raise eyebrows. It seems incredibly out of place coming from an author whose work consists mainly of instruction and refutation of heresy. It is especially odd coming from a Christian when viewed in the light of Paul’s more famous epistle to the Romans in which he takes pains to warn against heresies. Rome as the seat of the Church was constantly being inundated with all manner of unorthodoxy. Of course, the possibility exists that the Roman Church managed to cleanse itself of all falseness in the years that intervened between Paul and Ignatius or that Ignatius thought all was bully with the Church. It is, however, unlikely. That statement is highly suspect and seems to circumstantially confirm interpolation.

26. Trevett, *Study*, 192.

I regret the fact that so little study has been made of a possible relationship between the writings of Ignatius and the Seer . . .²⁷ (however unappealing the idea to those who regard Ignatius and his catholic co-religionists as the bastions of orthodoxy and the representatives of canonical ‘apostolic’ traditions). The possibility should be considered.²⁸

Though they see the correlation, Calder and Trevett fail to properly identify causation; they are of the opinion that Ignatius inspired Montanism. This is highly unlikely for a number of reasons. First, by the earliest dating, Montanism was not founded for half a century after the death of Ignatius. By other estimates Montanism began at least seventy years after the martyrdom. Either way, quite a few decades had elapsed between the two events. In between them, there are no epistolary indications of joyful martyrdom. Second, though Ignatius had been to Phrygia, the area that produced Montanism, there is no record stating that he had been particularly influential. Finally, though Ignatius had interacted with John, his teachings, and the areas in which he taught, generally fell under the influence of the Petrine Church. This is not so with Montanism. Phrygia fell deep in the heart of Johannine territory. It is quite clear that John’s teachings heavily influenced Montanism. According to Frend, “the place of the paraclete in Montanist theology, *their hopes of martyrdom*,²⁹ and the coming of the millennium are surely Johannine.”³⁰ There is no evidence of Ignatius (or Peter for that matter) having had the same influence.

When the *Epistle to the Romans* is viewed with its contemporary documents and other writings of Ignatius, the interpolations become clear. Martyrdom for salvation is not in keeping with his cultural tradition. It is, however, perfectly consistent with Montanism. Tertullian, wrote that “no one, on becoming absent from the body, is at once a dweller in the Lord, except by the prerogative of martyrdom, he gains a lodging in Paradise, not in the lower regions.”³¹ This is clearly quite similar to Ignatius’ claim that “it is going to be very difficult to get to God” without martyrdom (Ignatius, 85).

Though it is unlikely the treated document was written by Ignatius (at least in its entirety), its importance is not to be discounted. The *Epistle to the Romans* remains an important work in studying second and third century Christianity and helps to explain the prevalence of the martyrdom idea. Further, the influence it had on the early Church is not to be negated.³² For several decades, from about 170–210,³³ until the Church leadership clamped

27. Montanus.

28. Trevett, *Study*, 192.

29. Emphasis added.

30. W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 254.

31. Tert. *De An.*, 58.

32. Johannes Quasten calls the epistle “the most important of all.” Johannes Quasten, *Patrology: Volume I: The Beginnings of Patristic Literature From the Apostles Creed to Irenaeus* (Allen: Christian Classics, 1983): 64.

33. Once again, dating is hard to pin down.

down on the practice,³⁴ Christians happily threw themselves into the arms of martyrdom. It was the *Epistle to the Romans* that provided episcopal justification for these actions. As stated by Edward Gibbon,

Stories are related of the courage of martyrs who actually performed what Ignatius had intended, who exasperated the fury of the lions, pressed the executioner to hasten his office, cheerfully leaped into the fires which were kindled to consume them, and discovered a sensation of joy and pleasure in the midst of the most exquisite tortures.³⁵

Christians who grew tired of waiting for Jesus no longer had to; with the perceived backing of Ignatius the Apostolic Father, they could simply go to Christ.

34. As the years passed it became obvious that the Montanists' proclamation of an imminent *parousia* were false. The apostolic tradition triumphed over the prophesizing of Montanism. The apostolic advent allowed the various bishops to exercise an increasing control over their congregations: no more seeking of martyrdom.

35. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Volume II* (New York: Macmillan, 1914): 111.